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[1](#)B. ROME 405

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Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C/NF) PM Prodi remains weak despite his legislative success in the March 27 Senate vote to extend funding by one year for Italy's military missions abroad. His center-left coalition failed to pass the decree independent of the votes of Italy's Senators for Life. The Union of Christian Democrats of the Center's (UDC) decision to support the decree and the abstention by the remainder of the center-right marks a schism in the opposition. Prodi's government will continue to limp along, awaiting the next political crisis. Disunity in the center-right and fear of former PM Berlusconi's return are Prodi's best insurance for remaining in power. END SUMMARY.

THE SENATE VOTE ON EXTENDING AFGHAN MISSION FUNDING  
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[1](#)2. (U) March 27, the Italian Senate approved by a vote of 180 to 134 the government decree renewing funding through 2007 for military missions abroad, including Afghanistan (REF A). PM Prodi's center-left (CL) majority, needing 158 votes to pass the decree, mustered support from 155 of their 158 senators, plus those of four Senators For Life (SFL) and one center-right (CR) senator. Casini's 20 center-right Union of Christian Democrats of the Center (UDC) senators also voted yes, boosting support to 180. In the remainder of the CR "House of Freedom" coalition, former PM Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), former FM Fini's Alleanza Nazionale (AN), and Bossi's Lega Nord (LN) abstained. In the Senate, abstentions count as votes against.

EXPLAINING THEIR VOTES IN ADVANCE  
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[1](#)3. (C/NF) A series of Italian leaders from both the CR and the CL called on Ambassador Spogli in the days prior to the March 27 vote. UDC Party Leader Pierferdinando Casini informed the Ambassador on March 23 that his 20 Senators would support the government decree. Casini cited support for Italy's troops and their missions consistent with decisions taken while his party was in government as the primary reasons for his decision. Casini continued that he does not support the Prodi government and hopes that it will

soon fall on its own accord, but not over this issue. After the meeting, Casini announced his decision to the press.

¶4. (C/NF) The Ambassador met with several hawks and moderates from FI, including Gianni Letta, Marcello Pera and Renato Schifani, who all indicated that Berlusconi had not taken a decision on how to vote as late as 6:00 PM on March 26. Counting the votes out loud, Schifani detailed how Casini's decision to support the decree had already assured the decree's passage and that no action taken by FI would jeopardize that. Soon after the meeting with the Ambassador, a Schifani aide called Poloff to say that Berlusconi had decided to abstain from the vote.

#### AND THEN JUSTIFYING THEMSELVES AFTER THE FACT

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¶5. (C/NF) PM Prodi lauded passage of the decree as a success and made no comment of the fact that he failed to reach a "political majority" of 158 votes within his coalition. The CR, however, quickly pointed out that the decree passed only with the help of SFL--and the UDC, with FI Spokesman Bonaiuti calling for Prodi's resignation. Both Berlusconi and Fini have come under fire for breaking with earlier decisions taken while in government to support military missions abroad for the sake of achieving tactical political goals. They have both maintained that Prodi's approach to Afghanistan is sufficiently different from their own to justify the change of vote--citing the Mastrogiacono affair and the effects of caveats as primary differences.

¶6. (C/NF) After the vote, Casini went to great pains to explain that he voted for the decree and not Prodi's government and pointed out that the decree would have passed without his support (which is true but ignores the effect his announcement may have had on the voting intentions of other senators). To emphasize his point, Casini called on

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President Napolitano to suggest Prodi should resign. Napolitano deflected Casini's request by stating the March 27 vote was constitutionally sound.

#### GOVERNMENT STABILITY AFTER THE AFGHAN VOTE

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¶7. (C/NF) REF B and previous asserted that two of Prodi's strengths are: (1) the desire by the CL, including its radicals, to stay in power; and (2) a concern by both the CL, and a significant portion of the CR, that the collapse of Prodi's government would bring Berlusconi back into power. Former UDC Party Secretary Marco Follini told the Ambassador March 26 that Casini's decision on the vote is a clear indication that Casini wants a "new center-right, one without Berlusconi," and that Casini is trying to force that outcome.

A FI strategist agreed, telling Poloff that the Italian political system is blocked, with both Prodi and Berlusconi serving as the cork bottling up both the CL and the CR. He continued that current polls show that if elections were held today, Berlusconi would inevitably return as PM. Since Casini does not want to serve under Berlusconi again, Casini is likely to passively sustain Prodi until Berlusconi decides to leave the scene.

¶8. (C/NF) COMMENT: The Prodi government was born weak, but has managed to stumble past a series of tough political hurdles including approving the budget, the Vincenza base expansion and Afghan mission funding. The recent crises revolving around foreign policy issues have revealed that the CR is also divided tactically. Many in Berlusconi's own party believe Berlusconi needs to accept his future role is as "kingmaker," not as king. Those same Berlusconi admirers, however, doubt he is ready to step back just yet. Until then, a weak Prodi faces a divided opposition. This helps Prodi stay in power but without the strength for bold action, especially on potentially controversial foreign policy

initiatives or difficult domestic reforms. Political tensions are high, and the debate over gay marriages, pension reform and electoral reform are shrill. Nevertheless, unlike at any previous period of Prodi's current mandate, there is no tough parliamentary vote on the calendar.

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